

Reinventing Puppetry

By JEFFREY THOMAS

Web-based interactive sessions at the Center for Puppetry Arts provide fun and hands-on experience for schools facing budgetary constraints.

Part of the 2008-09 New Directions Series at the puppetry center in Atlanta, Georgia, Don Quixote has been adapted by Bobby Box in collaboration with Manuel Morán of Teatro SEA, a bilingual puppetry troupe from New York.



Jim Henson, with his Muppets, in his New York City office in 1985.

The Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, Georgia, has been delighting children and adults ever since Kermit the Frog and the late Jim Henson of Muppet fame cut the ribbon in 1978 at its official opening. The founder and president of the center, Vincent Anthony, himself a puppeteer, was at that time head of the American branch of the international puppetry organization, Union International de la Marionnette, which is now headquartered at the center. Every four years, the association has an international festival in a different country. The festival was held in the United States in 1980 in Washington, D.C., and Anthony had fiscal responsibility for the project.

"I saw the potential for something incredible," Anthony says. "We took over the entire Kennedy Center, and we had performances. ...We had two major exhibits in Washington—one at the Corcoran [Gallery of Art] and one at the Smithsonian. We curated puppets from all over the world, and we had an education component at the Kennedy Center as well. So that gave me the idea—because I didn't want that to go away. I wanted the United States to have the ability to entertain the world's artists and to celebrate the puppetry field through looking at objects."

The Center for Puppetry Arts has won many awards: it has 12 times won puppetry's highest award, the Citation of Excellence; it has repeatedly been chosen as one of MSN.com's top 10 children's museums in the United States; and it won the 2008 Microsoft Education Award.

The center's interactive museum features hands-on fun with more than 350 ancient and

modern puppets from around the world, while the center's permanent collection comprises more than 1,000 puppets.

"If someone wants to see what puppetry was like, is like, in their region, we have it," Anthony says. "The center is global in nature, and someone coming from another country can connect very easily with their culture, or understand another culture."

"We wanted to put a magnifying glass over the field globally and to look at all of it on an ongoing basis, which is what we've done for 30 years. We wanted to highlight every aspect of the field that we possibly could—that's the reason the word 'center' is in our title."

Create-A-Puppet Workshops are available for children from kindergarten through 12th grade on such topics as Cultural Awareness through International Puppetry. Workshops for preschool children have been offered since 1995. Adult education classes in puppetry started in 1997.

The center attracts more than 350,000 visitors each year to its workshops, puppet shows and exhibits.

In the Family Series, the center's company of puppeteers presents original adaptations of such classic stories as *The Ugly Duckling*.

The New Directions Series is geared toward adults with, for example, the Xperimental Puppetry Theater presenting mature content and employing everything from marionettes to

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Above: The Ugly Duckling, part of the 2008-09 Family Series at the center.

Right: Adults can learn from puppetry professionals such skills as character voice, puppet making and manipulation.

robots and masked dancers.

The Microsoft Education Award recognized the center's distance learning program for improving education quality for rural and low-income communities, as well as those with special needs, by delivering arts lessons through interactive videoconferencing.

In a sample interactive video on the center's Web site, a teacher leads a class through the construction and manipulation of their

For more information:

Center for Puppetry Arts

<http://www.puppet.org/>

The Tech Awards

<http://www.techawards.org/laureates/stories/index.php?id=184>

own puppets, which can then be used to explore topics such as the biology of butterflies or rain-forest ecology.

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straints, interactive videoconferencing is an excellent way to provide students with hands-on experience in the arts.

Anthony says he has a vision: "total access to the center from any part of the globe."

He sees "tremendous potential" globally for virtual tours, interactive programming and distance learning. "I want to eventually have all of what we do available on a regular basis on our Web site—which means you can go in, you can look at a performance taking place, you can go to the distance learning studio and see what's happening there," Anthony says.

More than 130,000 students in 43 U.S. states and three foreign countries have participated in the center's distance learning programs. In September 2008, the center launched its permanent collection online.

The Henson family announced in 2007 that it was choosing the center as the home for their definitive collection of Jim Henson's creations—500 to 700 puppets, props, scenic elements, posters, sketches, drawings, films and videos. The collection will be housed in a newly proposed Jim Henson Wing, to be included in the center's new museum space, scheduled to open in Atlanta in 2011.



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Photographs courtesy Center for Puppetry Arts